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SOUTHWEST MUSEUM LEAFLETS

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BLACKFOOT MEDICINE-PIPE CEREMONY

BY

WALTER McCLINTOCK

WOLF PLUME, *Makúyi-sapop*, NOTED BLACKFOOT HEADMAN.
Photo by Walter McClintock.

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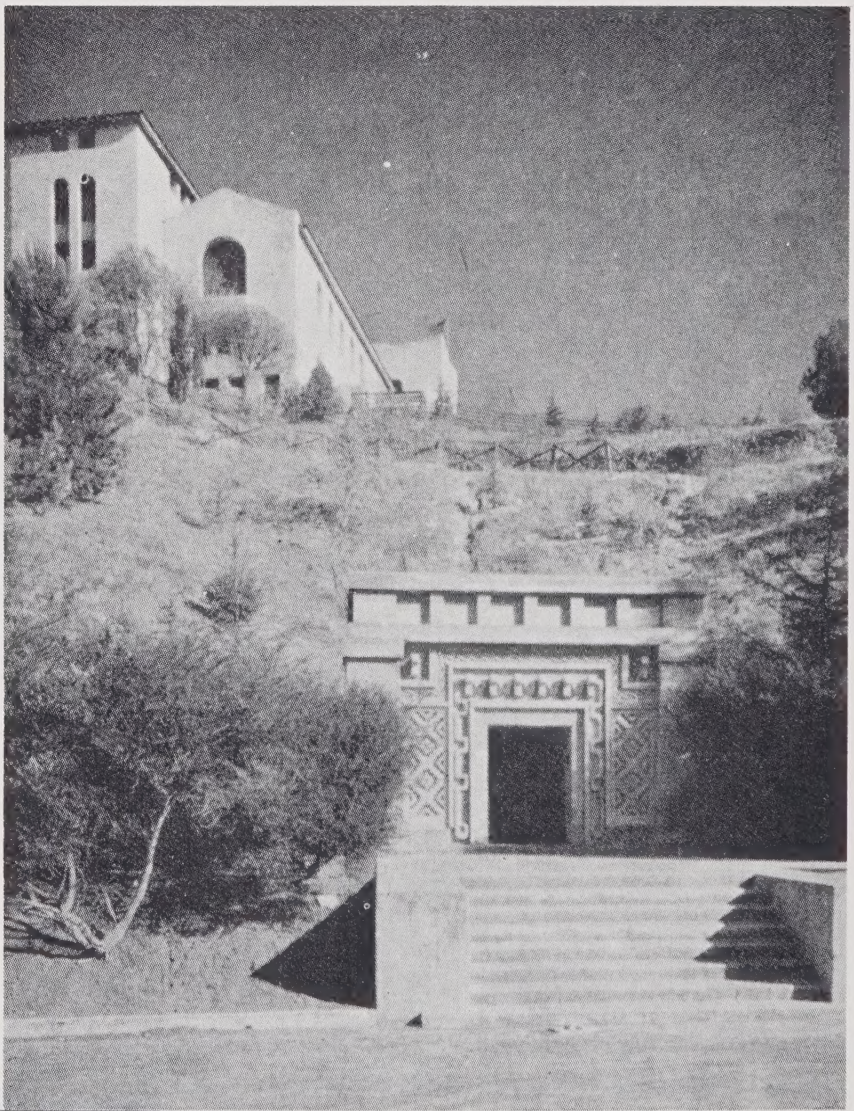

THE SOUTHWEST MUSEUM—THAT BUILDING ON THE HILL

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Blackfoot Medicine-Pipe Ceremony

By Walter McClintock

After many years the Blackfoot circle-camp and its surroundings are still fresh in my mind.[1] Never was the prairie lovelier than in the golden light of a July morning when I crossed the meadows on my way to Willow creek, Montana, —a trout stream of clear cold water lined with thickets of alder and willows, snowberry bushes in flower, and in marshy places blue flags and blue-eyed grasses. Prairie birds were singing, horned-larks trilling and fluttering, hovering like butterflies against a deep blue sky; willow thrushes in thickets; white-crowned sparrows with gentle and uplifted song; and lovely mountain bluebirds.

Dim on the eastern horizon, where the sun was rising, were the hazy blue outlines of the Sweetgrass Hills; west, the snow-capped summits of the Rocky Mountains. I went through prairie grasses hung with sparkling lace and shining dew; and wild flowers up to my waist—blue larkspur, purple geranium, fleabane, scarlet Indian paintbrush, blue lupine, and large yellow sunflowers. I saw a pair of graceful kit-foxes gliding swiftly through the long prairie grass, a killdeer with white chest-bands, and a long-billed curlew with brown streaked neck and head.

After a dip in the cold creek, I returned to our lodge in the big circle-camp. My heart was light, and I felt happy, the world of white civilization easily forgotten; for with my horses, cameras, and Indian tipi to look after, I was free and independent, and had plenty to do. In the tribal camp morning was the quietest time, for few Indians were stirring; afternoons and evenings were the most interesting.

I wandered around the circle with my camera. The sun had set and the lodges were lighted by inside-fires revealing in soft colors the fanciful bird and wild-animal pictures on their covers—buffalo, elk, antelope, deer, otter, star constellations of the night skies. Fires were smouldering in some of the tipis, then fitful flashes would illuminate and suddenly fade. A fresh west wind from the Rockies whistled through the tops of the lodge-poles which extended above their tall conical structures, tinkling the small bells at the tips of the wings and rattling clusters of deer- and antelope-hoofs hanging over the doorways. A group of Indians on their way to a dance

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[1]See McClintock, Walter, A Blackfoot Circle-camp, *The Masterkey*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 5-12, Sept.-Oct. 1927.

were singing to an accompaniment of jingling bells strapped about their legs. Two young night-singers passed, riding the same horse, while making their rounds of the camp. Then suddenly a crowd of braves made a rush to lay hold of the night-riders; the frightened horse bucked and plunged, but the sturdy young singers held fast and galloped away amid goodnatured laughter.

I came to a small lodge of a poor family on the outskirts, where the fire burned low and a medicine-man doctored—snuffing, grunting, and stamping his feet in a bear dance. At another lodge a man who reclined upon his couch by the fire shouted loudly so his neighbor could hear, "What has become of the woman who went for water?" (*Akóochkai simichsiwak.*) He shouted again, louder and more impatiently: "What has become of that woman who went for water? She has been gone a long time!"

Then I heard a strange method of public rebuke. Indians in nearby lodges took up the cry; they mocked the man's impatient and angry tone; they shouted comically. "What has become of the woman who went for water?" It spread from lodge to lodge, from one band to another, all the way around the big circle, ending with uproarious laughter and general disturbance.

While I stood in the shadow listening to the alluring sounds of camp-life, I saw two figures muffled in blankets move stealthily from lodge to lodge. They stopped at the tipi of Big Spring, a prominent chief; it glowed with light from an inside-fire and they peered cautiously through a crack in the door. They were Medicine-Pipe scouts on the lookout for a victim. That night Lone Chief would give up his sacred Pipe. He had told some of his friends secretly that he wanted to catch Big Spring and make him his successor; he was prominent and could afford to pay well for the Pipe.

The owner of a Medicine Pipe could force anyone to purchase it, regardless of the wishes of the victim, provided he could catch him. If he found him asleep and touched him with the Pipe, he dared not resist; death or ill luck were the penalties for refusing a Medicine Pipe.

But Big Spring had warning that Lone Chief was after him. He and his wife did not want the care and expense of owning a Pipe. So he stayed away from his tipi that night, sleeping instead in the hills outside the camp-circle, where the scouts could not find him; so Lone Chief had to make another choice.

The Medicine Pipe men were assembled in the lodge of Lone

Chief. They had opened his Pipe bundle and were singing and drumming, waiting news from their scouts, who were active throughout the camp. They sang Bear songs, because the supernatural power of the Pipe came from the grizzly bear; and they danced, imitating the way a grizzly pounces upon his victim in the night; also Owl songs to cast a spell over their victim so that he might not escape, for the owl is a bird of night, and its power also belongs to the Pipe. So Lone Chief and his associates kept on with their ceremony, awaiting their scouts.

In the meantime I returned to the lodge and lay on my couch to await developments of the Medicine Pipe ceremony. It was a night of bright moonlight, and the activities of the big camp kept many awake. Even the baby, Tears-In-Her-Eyes, was restless in her little hammock which hung from our lodge-poles. Strikes-On-Both-Sides rocked the hammock, singing over and over the old Blackfoot cradle song, "Come, wolf, eat this baby if she doesn't sleep." The dogs of the camp were excited and on the move, barking, fighting, and on foraging raids. In the night a thieving dog came silently into our lodge and seized a side of bacon near the door; but the watchful Strikes-On-Both-Sides made such an outcry and was after the dog so quickly with a stick that he dropped the bacon and fled, yelping, through the door. Then a party of young fellows came close to our lodge and gave a begging dance. After Strikes-On-Both-Sides gave them food, they departed to dance at another tipi.

The lodge of Morning Plume was so close that I could hear every word. His small son was restless and bothered his old grandmother. When the fire burned low the child said that he was cold, and began to cry. She was scarcely back in her bed than he cried again for water. This wakened his baby sister; so the mother sang a cradle song and rocked her to sleep. In a small lodge near that of Morning Plume a baby was very ill. I heard a medicine-man come in the night to begin a monotonous drumming. The beat was low and regular, and sounded muffled like the steady throbbing of a human heart. Before daybreak the drumming suddenly ceased, and I knew the child had died. For a moment there was silence, then the mother began to wail.

These incidents in the big Blackfoot camp were like the human experiences in any densely populated center of white civilization. Though the extremes of wealth and poverty were absent, yet the lights and shadows of domestic joy and

sorrow, health and happiness, humor and sadness, love and hate, of the old man's wisdom and thoughtfulness, and the confidence of youth, were all in that primitive Indian camp with even sharper and more impressive contrasts, because of the close association of the people.

Before dawn a rider galloped through the camp and made an announcement, using the repressional mood—often heard in the speeches of Blackfoot chiefs and by heralds for rhetorical effect. He called upon the people to awaken and be alert; but he must have meant the opposite, for no one moved or paid any attention—as if it were a joke.

Then came the early morning breeze from the Rocky Mountains, making a humming sound against the ropes; and the wings at the top of our lodge began to flap. I heard the sound of horse-hoofs on the turf, moving toward the meadow where the tribal herd was feeding—it was the day-man going to relieve the night-herder.

Suddenly, the sound of drums, with shouting and singing, came from the band of Fat-Melters; the scouts had caught some one with the Medicine Pipe. Then Elk Horn, the herald of the Brave-Dog society, rode forth beating a drum. He shouted as he galloped through the camp: "You Fat-Melters! Get up and eat! Wolf Plume (*Makúyi-sapop*)[1] has been caught by Lone Chief with his Medicine Pipe! Let everyone help! Do not delay! The sun will soon rise! Wolf Plume will pay many horses, robes, blankets! Let everyone come to the ceremony!"

Quickly I dressed and made ready two cameras—a 4 by 5 graphlex and a 3¼ by 4¼ kodak, a good equipment for those days of long ago. When I went out from the lodge, a bright morning star was low over the prairie, but the sun had not risen. In the dim light I saw a crowd gathering at the lodge of Wolf Plume where he was caught in his sleep. Soon the drums began to sound, the signal that Lone Chief and Wolf Plume were coming out with the Medicine Pipe. Then they came from the lodge bearing the sacred Pipe with its elaborate decorations, and a fan of eagle-feathers. Their wives followed with the medicine bundles and regalia. The drummers who followed were prominent men who would help in the ceremony of transfer. I saw them march through the camp and made picture records, though the sun had not yet risen. They went to the tipi of Tearing Lodge, the old father-in-law of Wolf Plume; drumming was taboo in Wolf Plume's own lodge because of his Beaver bundle. On the other hand, drums had

[1] See the portrait on the cover.

an important part in the Medicine Pipe ceremony, for their sound represented the drumming of grouse with their wings.

Lone Chief and Wolf Plume walked together at the head of the procession with the Medicine Pipe. Now, when they came to the tipi of Tearing Lodge, where the ceremony was to take place, they waited a moment; but the singing and drumming continued. Beside the open door stood the aged mother of Wolf Plume with other women. Her hair was snow-white, and she leaned upon a staff. When she saw Wolf Plume, her son, bearing the sacred Pipe and heard the singing and the drumming, the old woman was so excited and overcome with emotion that she waved her staff in the air and I heard her shout:

		You are now	
"Wolf Plume!	My son!	a great chief!	I am glad!"
(*Makúyi-sapop!*	*Nochkóa!*	*Akáinauàsiu!*	*Nitáachsitaki!*)

Then the drumming ceased and the Medicine Pipe men entered the lodge. They took their positions at the back, together with the Pipe and its sacred bundle and regalia. Lone Chief, who was giving up his Pipe, sat in the center, Wolf Plume, the new owner at his right, and on Wolf Plume's left the seven Medicine Pipe men who took part in the ceremony. Immediately to the right of Wolf Plume were his wife Strikes First (*I'tomau-aiáki*) and the wife of Lone Chief. Beyond them were the head-wives of the seven singers and drummers, also prominent chiefs and their families who came for the ceremony. The large lodge was filled, and many stood outside.

The members of Wolf Plume's band of Fat-Melters (blood relatives) and many of his friends brought gifts to help him pay for the Medicine Pipe; for they considered that a great honor had been conferred on all the band. On this occasion Lone Chief was given forty horses, a large pile of clothing, blankets, robes, and provisions. Tearing Lodge, father-in-law of Wolf Plume, received the gifts and announced the name of each giver. My present, a blanket of bright colors, was called with the rest. It was characteristic of the tribe to be open-handed and to give freely. Now there was especial enthusiasm in the giving, because of their high regard and good will for Wolf Plume and his wife, and their jealous feeling for the honor of the group.

The photographic series of this forced-purchase and transfer ceremony began before sunrise. My first exposures were made between three and four o'clock in the morning. The two cameras were placed upon tripods, by the door and inside

the lodge, facing the four principals who were seated at the back with the Pipe and its regalia. At the beginning Wolf Plume had around him a heavy Hudson's Bay blanket with broad red and blue stripes, the early morning air was so cold.

The ceremony of transfer began as the sun was rising, its first golden rays shining into the open front of the lodge, upon Lone Chief and Wolf Plume and their wives; and the seven Medicine-Pipe singers with their painted drums, decorated with symbolic pictures for the sun, moon, and stars, and the figures of birds and animals, according to the origin dreams of their owners. Sweet-pine was burned as incense on a hot coal; and while the seven singers drummed rhythmically, Lone Chief and his wife led them in a series of seven Thunder chants, placing their hands in the rising smoke. Then they all sang the Buffalo song, making the buffalo sign with forefingers curved for horns, while Wolf Plume and his wife unfastened the thongs of buffalo rawhide from the sacred bundle.

In the Antelope song the singers imitated with their hands the graceful motions of running antelope. While loosing the wrapper of elkskin from the bundle, they sang the Elk song and made the sign by holding their hands over their heads, with fingers extended for antlers; the two chief-women kept shaking their heads in imitation of a bull-elk ready to charge, as if to tear loose the wrapper with their antlers. Thus the sacred bundle of the Medicine Pipe was opened, exposing to view many skins of birds and wild animals, and other relics.

Then Wolf Plume took off his former clothes and used the fine costume that went with the Medicine Pipe—a war-shirt of soft-tanned deerskin decorated with broad beaded bands and trimmed over the shoulders and arms with scalp-locks and black-tipped ermine-tails, and with leggings and moccasins to match. He also wore the ceremonial headband that went with the Pipe and which distinguished him from the others as the guardian and owner; it was from the skin of a white buffalo (albino), with an eagle-feather, and decorated with colored beads.

Lone Chief transferred to Wolf Plume the Medicine-Pipe horse, which was ridden only by the owner of the Pipe, also the saddle, bridle, whip, and lariat to go with the horse. And Lone Chief's wife transferred to the wife of Wolf Plume the beautiful beaded deerskin costume she would wear in the Medicine-Pipe ceremonies, of soft-tanned doeskin decorated with colored beadwork, and with moccasins and leggings to match.

Now is the time for the dramatic dances to begin—for the skins of the birds and wild animals represented in the bundle. Anyone who had made a vow could take one of these skins and dance with it; but only the owners of Medicine Pipe might rise and dance with the Pipe itself. When a prominent chief danced, or a warrior noted for his brave deeds, he received special attention. Wolf Plume, however, to whom the Pipe was being transferred, did not rise to dance, but sat beside the bundle and received the skins and relics from those who took part.

For the Grizzly Bear dance, the seven drummers chanted the words:

"In the spring I grow restless."

Lone Chief arose and imitated the actions of a grizzly coming forth from its winter den in the spring; and chanted while he danced:

"My robe is holy.
I wander in the summer."

The seven Medicine-Pipe men drummed rhythmically and sang the Bear songs, while Lone Chief danced like a bear. He put his feet together and imitated the way a bear moves backward and forward with short jumps, holding his hands as a bear does its paws, breathing hard, digging for ground-squirrels, and making the awkward motions of a bear running.

He placed both hands upon the Medicine Pipe, and chanted:

"Holy Chief (Pipe)! Everyone will now behold you,
Men, women, and children."

Slowly raising the Pipe, Lone Chief chanted:

"Great Spirit (*A'pistotoki*), behold our Chief arise!
The Chief is holy."

He now danced with the Pipe, shaking it the way a bear might, careful not to handle it too roughly, lest it bring on a storm; nor to make a misstep, nor allow a skin or feather to fall from the Pipe, lest misfortune overtake him. He blew shrilly upon his bone medicine-whistle to represent the sound made by the wings of the Thunderbird when it appears first in the spring, the time the bear is accustomed to leave its winter den. Holding the Medicine Pipe in his right hand as he danced, Lone Chief spread out the fingers of his left to imitate the wings of the Thunderbird; and, after laying the Pipe down, he finished with the song:

"This lodge is holy.
The ground where the Chief now lies is holy."

When the Medicine-Pipe men drummed and chanted rhythmically for the Antelope dance, Red Fox arose and while he danced made motions with his hands to imitate an antelope walking. He took the Pipe and moved his head like an antelope alert for danger.

For the Swan song, Bear Child (*Kyáiopokà*) danced alone to represent the chief swan, the leader of the flock. He kept making the Swan sign by holding both arms extended and fingers spread out in imitation of a flying swan.

While the seven drummers chanted and beat time rhythmically for the Crane song, there were several dancers who gave the Crane call in unison and made motions to imitate the actions of flying cranes. All remained seated during the Resting songs which were sung for ducks and geese and various other water-birds.

Wolf Plume and his wife were painted while the Medicine-Pipe men drummed and chanted the four Horse songs, special care being used to sing these accurately, lest misfortune befall their horses. After an interval for rest, during which a red-stone pipe was passed for everyone to smoke, seven Owl songs were sung. As a bird of night the owl had a prominent place in the ritual of the Pipe, and was honored and propitiated by its favored food being used in the ceremony—known by the Blackfoot as the *Siksakasim* (root), found along the streams in the mountains and also called "Indian horehound."

They sang seven songs for the band worn around the head of the Pipe-owner during the ceremony; it was made from the skin of a sacred white buffalo. Then seven songs were sung for a water bird known as the "Good Rusher", with the wonderful power of rushing over the water and believed to drown people by dragging them under. Also a Muskrat song which was used by the Pipe-owner when he removed his face-paint:

"All the water-birds and little water-animals are my friends."

The Bee songs were used by the Pipe-owner when he was angered, because anyone who provokes a bee will be stung; it also made him safe from any magic spell or charm, and caused the power for evil to react upon an enemy who might strive to injure him.

A woman's pipe which had a flat stem and no decoration belonged to the bundle. It was taken out by Strikes First, the wife of Wolf Plume, and smoked only by the women. The Medicine Pipe itself, however (*Ninámiskan*) had a stem, thirty

inches long, which was elaborately decorated with bird-and animal-skins, and had a fan of eagle-feathers.

The ceremony of transfer came to an end by all singing in unison the Good Luck song for Wolf Plume, the new Pipe-owner. The singing was led by the Medicine-Pipe men, with their painted drums. Thereafter Wolf Plume should sing it when he especially wanted anything.

At sunset, Lone Chief and his wife led the new Pipe-owners from the lodge. They together faced in turn the four directions and chanted:

(Toward the west)

"Over there are the mountains.
May you gaze upon them as long as you live.
From them you will get your sweet-pine as incense."

(North)

"Over there is the star-that-never-moves (Pole Star).
From the north will come your strength;
May you see the star for many years."

(East)

"Over there is old age.
From that direction comes the light of the sun."

(South)

"May warm winds from the south bring you plenty of food."

For four days the former Pipe-owners gave Wolf Plume and his wife instructions in the care of the Medicine Pipe and its ritual. The bundle should be opened and the ceremony given when the first thunder is heard in the spring, because of a vow to renew the tobacco and the transfer to a new owner.

At the sound of the first thunder, Medicine-Pipe owners invited old and young; and the Indians were glad, because they were prayed for and received tobacco from the sacred bundle. The owner would take his Pipe and, holding it toward the sky, pray for everyone present that they might not be killed by the Thunder—it brought them under the good will of the Thunder.

Wolf Plume, by nature a practical man, said he was depressed at having this Pipe thrust upon him; of all the sacred bundles, the Medicine Pipe was endowed with the greatest power, and it also brought the greatest burdens. He already had a Beaver bundle with long and complicated ceremony and many taboos,[1] and the Yellow Buffalo tipi with its ritual and taboos. It made him sad to think of the additional burden,

[1]See McClintock, Walter, The Blackfoot Beaver Bundle, *The Masterkey*, vol. 9, nos. 3, 4, May, July, 1935, reprinted as *Leaflets*, nos. 2 and 3.

especially for his wife; the Pipe would make their life more complicated. Yet the possession of a Pipe would add much to their social position in tribal life, and it brought religious recognition too. In every lodge that Wolf Plume and his wife entered, they would be honored with prominent places; loud talk would be suppressed in their presence; as a Medicine-Pipe owner he would be entitled to the best cuts in buffalo drives; he was invited to important tribal meetings and to sit in council; he would be one of the headmen in moving camp and in the selection of camp-sites.

Lone Chief and his wife now instructed the new owners of the Pipe in its daily care. By day it hung from a tripod behind the tipi and was taken inside at night and in bad weather. On clear mornings the Pipe must be brought out, carried around the south side of the lodge, and placed on the tripod; after sunset it was brought back by the north side, always using the direction of the sun's course through the sky.

Pipe-owners must never point at a person with their fingers, only with the thumb; nor move anything burning with a knife, lest it cause their teeth to ache; nor pick up a lost article without first singing the necessary song; never allow a dog to jump upon them, for it would cause the body to ache. The Medicine-Pipe horse must be used only by its owner, lest some of his horseherd sicken and die. The word *kyaio* (bear) must never be spoken in the presence of the Pipe; it would cause sickness and bad dreams. However, the evil power might be averted by burning sweet-pine as incense. Before lighting the fire, sweet-pine must be burned every morning, also before taking out the Pipe and before carrying it back in the evening. No one should walk in front of the Pipe-owner, lest it cause sore eyes or even blindness. He must not light his pipe with a willow stick, but should use cottonwood or service-berry. Firewood inside the lodge must always lie in the same direction as the Pipe—and none be taken out. No one should speak loud, aim a gun, or throw anything near the place where the Pipe is kept. The owner must not strike a dog or a horse; nor cut a horse's tail; nor touch a dead person; nor say anything against the character of anyone. If he invites anyone to smoke, he must supply enough tobacco for four pipes; and if not satisfied then, for four more; if not time for four, the guest must smoke alone. The Pipe must always be handed bowl first to the owner; he should take hold of it with both hands, the way a bear acts. Never smoke with a woman, nor anyone who presses down the tobacco with his fingers—a

special stick must be used for that purpose. If anyone tries to borrow tobacco, or asks four times for a pipe, he takes the risk of having the Medicine Pipe turned over to him, as if taken through a vow.

Much information about the Medicine Pipe is unknown to its owners, because they are unwilling to pay for the necessary instruction. However, this knowledge would be of great advantage to an owner, because anyone who cares for his Pipe and follows its rules would have abundance, while one who is careless and neglects it might lose everything. It was said that in the case of Lone Chief, the knowledge he gained had proved a good investment: his property increased and Wolf Plume who took over his Pipe paid him well for his instruction.